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## Life, Death and Transformation: Education and Incompleteness in Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*

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### Abstract

*At the end of the main part of Hermann Hesse's classic novel The Glass Bead Game, the central character, Joseph Knecht, dies suddenly. This paper considers the educational significance of Hesse's portrayal of Knecht's death. I argue that this pivotal moment in the book tells us a great deal about the process of educational transformation. Close attention is paid to the theme of incompleteness as a key to understanding Knecht's life, death and transformation in educational terms. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role played by education in serving as a bridge between death and life.*

### Keywords

literature, philosophy, teaching, immortality

### Introduction

In 1943, after a protracted and complicated process of composition, the German writer Hermann Hesse published his last and longest novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel*. The book first appeared in English under the title *Magister Ludi* in 1949, and has been available as *The Glass Bead Game* since 1969 (Hesse, 2000a). *The Glass Bead Game* is set in Castalia: a 'pedagogical province' of the future (ca. 2200) where scholars devote themselves to knowledge and intellectual life. Central to Castalian society is the Glass Bead Game: a kind of universal language – a way of playing with the total contents of a culture, shaped by all the arts and sciences – through which values can be expressed and considered in relation to each other, with unlimited combinations of possible themes and ideas. There are three parts to the book. In the first section the narrator, a Castalian writing around the year 2400, provides a general introduction to the history of the Game. The second and main part of the book details the life of Joseph Knecht, who progresses through the Castalian system as an exemplary student and exponent of the Game, eventually reaching the exalted position of Magister Ludi (Master of the Glass Bead Game). The third section comprises a selection of poems and several fictional autobiographies ("Lives"): these are

presented as the posthumous writings of Joseph Knecht. Students who graduate from the elite schools in Castalia and move on to a period of free study have few obligations, but one requirement is that each year they complete an essay imagining their lives in an earlier period of human history. Three such “Lives” from Joseph’s student days are included in *The Glass Bead Game*: “The Rainmaker,” “The Father Confessor” and “The Indian Life.” Several other characters in the book play pivotal roles in Knecht’s educational life: Plinio Designori, a fellow student who visits Castalia from the outside world, and with whom Joseph engages in lively debates; Father Jacobus, who teaches Knecht the value of history; Fritz Tegularius,<sup>1</sup> a nervous, delicate, anti-social but brilliant colleague and friend in the Order of the Glass Bead Game; and the Music Master, Joseph’s revered mentor and primary source of early encouragement.

The main part of the novel depicts a complex and multifaceted process of transformation. On the one hand, Joseph seems destined for greatness. He excels in his earlier studies, develops a deep understanding of the Glass Bead Game, and, after finding himself in the position of Magister Ludi having barely entered middle age, discharges his onerous responsibilities with distinction. He seems, at first glance, to be the model Castalian. At the same time, from his student days onwards, he experiences doubts and uncertainties. Plinio, as an outsider, brings an alternative perspective on Castalian life to Joseph’s attention, forcing him to question some of his most cherished assumptions. Joseph’s critical examination and questioning of Castalian ideals finds further nourishment during the period he spends at a Benedictine monastery with Father Jacobus. And, as Knecht grows and matures in his role as Magister Ludi, he comes to realize that the Order of the Glass Bead Game is already in decay.<sup>2</sup> He comes to see the disconnection between the ‘pedagogical province’ and the rest of the world as increasingly problematic, and eventually makes the unprecedented decision to resign his post as Magister Ludi and leave the Order. Having spent most of his life in a protected educational world, and having reached the very summit of the Castalian hierarchy, Knecht gives it all away to take on the humble task of becoming a private tutor for Tito, Plinio’s son. This process barely begins, however, as Knecht dies suddenly while swimming with Tito in an icy mountain lake. With this seemingly inexplicable event, the main part of the novel ends.

This paper considers the educational significance of Knecht’s death.<sup>3</sup> It is argued that this pivotal moment in the book tells us a great deal about Knecht’s life and the process of educational transformation he undergoes as a citizen of Castalia. The paper falls into three main parts. The first section sketches a number of responses from critics to this part of the novel. Hesse himself, it will be noted, saw the death as a moment of profound pedagogical importance.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, have provided alternative interpretations of Knecht’s character and premature demise. For some, Knecht “outgrows” the confines intended by Hesse and, with a less than revealing narrator, lends himself to multiple readings. (As a representative of the Castalian hierarchy, the narrator adopts a somewhat ‘official’ tone. Indeed, the narrator can be seen as trapped within the very decadence Knecht seeks to leave.) The second section focuses on the theme of incompleteness as a key to understanding Knecht’s life and death in educational terms. It is suggested that if the deeper meaning of Knecht’s death is to be grasped, attention needs to be paid not just to the main part of the book but also to the poems and fictional autobiographies that follow. The final part of the paper considers the role of education in serving as a bridge between death and life. The paper concludes that *The Glass Bead Game*, when read holistically, has much to offer those seeking to address questions of enduring philosophical and educational importance.<sup>5</sup>

## The death of Joseph Knecht

What happens at the very end of the main part of the book? Having made the momentous decision to resign his position as Magister Ludi and to leave the Order, Knecht is reinvigorated and ready to take on the new task of educating Plinio's son Tito. He spends a short time with Plinio before meeting up with Tito at the Designori's cottage by a mountain lake. The next day, despite having felt unwell, he follows Tito into the lake for an early morning swim. Tito is already well across the lake when, in looking back, he finds the older man is no longer behind him. He searches desperately but with his own strength beginning to ebb he is eventually forced to return to land. Warming himself with the dressing gown Knecht had left behind, he sits, stunned, staring at the icy water. He feels overwhelmed by perplexity, terror and deep sadness. In this moment, he reaches a new state of awareness:

Oh! he thought in grief in horror, now I am guilty of his death. And only now, when there was no longer need to save his pride or offer resistance, he felt, in shock and sorrow, how dear this man had become to him. And since in spite of all rational objections he felt responsible for the Master's death, there came over him, with a premonitory shudder of awe, a sense that this guilt would utterly change him and his life, and would demand much greater things of him than he had ever before demanded of himself. (Hesse, 2000a, p. 403)

With these words, the main part of the book closes. It is difficult for the reader who has lived with Knecht through all his years of youthful education in the schools of Eschholz and Waldzell, his time in the Benedictine monastery with Father Jacobus, his tenure as Magister Ludi, and his difficult departure from Castalia not to feel profoundly moved by this abrupt ending. This seems too sudden, too violent a disruption to the life that was being told and the promise of what lay ahead. It is a testament to the power of Hesse's story that the reader comes to feel a deep connection with Joseph Knecht, despite the 'distancing' effect created by his Castalian biographer.

Yet, Knecht's premature death can also be seen as a form of release – perhaps even a form of *liberation*. It must be remembered that Hesse was heavily influenced by Eastern philosophy. He took the Hindu notion of reincarnation and the Buddhist concept of rebirth seriously. Hesse confessed that he was not sure what lay beyond the death of the physical body, but he felt certain that death was not the end. Death can be seen as a new beginning, a new form of life. There is, as Walter Naumann puts it, no need for despair: "there will always be another human, like Knecht, to transmit a sense of responsibility to the younger generation" (cited in Cohn, 1950, p. 353). Hesse's original plan for the book is significant here: he envisaged a work depicting a series of lives, with the same man living at different moments in history. With these points in mind, Knecht's death can be seen as a fulfillment, not a denial, of his destiny – something he had, in various ways, predicted or at least prefigured from his days as a young Waldzell student. Hesse does not give a definitive answer to the question of death, but death is present throughout the book. We discover that Joseph's parents may have died while he was very young (the narrator remains uncertain about this); careful attention is paid to the changes the Music Master undergoes in the months leading up to his death; the brutal treatment of Bertram by his colleagues in the Order prior to his rumored death<sup>6</sup> is described in some detail (Bertram served as deputy to Knecht's predecessor in the role of Magister Ludi); and in the

autobiographies death figures prominently as a theme. Joseph's death is, however, arguably the most important in the book.

Hilde Cohn sees Knecht's death as a symbolic event of vital significance for the work as a whole (Cohn, 1950, p. 353). She argues that the book is about a man "whose essential qualities are clearly present from the beginning and whose main development consists in an increasing clarity and consciousness of himself" (p. 348). Knecht's death, she maintains, is the center towards which Knecht has wandered all his life. Knecht's end is "at the same time a beginning, not only for Tito, but for himself as well" (p.355):

In his last transformation Knecht enters new, unknown, and mysterious bonds, not as one who flees, but as one who is called – called back to the source of life. Only now is his state of isolation overcome; the spot in his heart which had been dead and empty is called upon and can respond, whole and young, to take him to new spheres – home. (p. 355)

A fruitful way to read the book, perhaps, is to see Knecht's sudden death as an invitation to reflect more deeply on the achievements of his life and on what might have been. The ending of the main part of the book is, from this point of view, *meant* to be troubling, unsettling. It is shocking and saddening but also hopeful and uplifting. For we gain a sense of not just what might have been for Knecht, but what *could* be for Tito. And we only gain this sense of what could be because of what has come before. The symbolism in the final paragraph of Tito placing the former Magister's gown around himself, and the hint that he will emerge from his immaturity and go on to greatness himself, can be taken seriously precisely because of the life Knecht has lived right up to the moment of his death. Knecht, even during the brief period during which Tito has known him, has demonstrated humility, insight and commitment to the task of teaching his young charge. The decision to swim after Tito was, as Hesse himself notes, of profound pedagogical importance:

Despite his illness, Knecht could sagaciously and artfully have avoided his leap into the mountain water. He leaps notwithstanding ... because he cannot disappoint this youngster who cannot be won over very easily. And he leaves behind a Tito for whom this sacrifice of life on the part of a man far superior to him represents lifelong admonition and guidance, and will educate him more than all the sermons of the wise. (cited in Mileck, 1978, p. 304)

Hesse was insistent that "Knecht's resignation and departure were not rank defection, but [a] commendable response to conscience and concern, and that his icy plunge and death were not folly and failure, but sacrifice and success, commitment fulfilled for Knecht and admonition and inspiration for Tito" (Mileck, 1978, p. 304). Mileck reinforces this view:

As a symbol, Knecht's strange death leaves much room for conjecture. Were one to consider it an indication of Joseph's inability to cope with real life, of utter failure, then Castalia, of which he is one of the hardest members, and all it represents, must be deemed worthless. Such an explanation (the discounting of *Geist*), totally at variance with Hesse's attitude to life in his later years, warrants no discussion. (cited in Bandy, 1972, p. 300)

Other scholars are not so sure. Bandy, for example, points out that if Hesse had written no book other than *The Glass Bead Game*, we might have been left with more questions than answers. He does not deny that Hesse himself saw Knecht's final actions and death in a positive light, but suggests that the evidence presented in the book is inconsistent with this position. It is not, Bandy suggests, "that Hesse did not know what he was about" but rather that "the character of Knecht, once brought to life, begins to perform beyond the conscious control of his creator" (Bandy, 1972, p. 301). The spark of life in Knecht must, however, be detected and understood by means other than those presented at a surface level by the narrator. For the narrator, as a representative of Castalia, writes of Knecht in a manner that is stilted and largely unsympathetic. It is as if there is a puppet show, with the narrator manipulating Knecht's strings, and the narrator in turn being manipulated by Hesse. Where Knecht's own words appear in the book, they are "too formal and decorous to permit very much self-revelation" (p. 302). We end up with a "perplexing personage" constructed by several voices, and we cannot be sure which of these voices (if any) is Knecht's own (p. 302).

Bandy picks up on the notion of dualities, and in particular the dialectical relationship between the contemplative (Apollonian) life and the active (Dionysian) life, as a central theme in the book. He sees Knecht as a representative of the former and Plinio as a representative of the latter. The tension in their relationship is resolved by Knecht's involvement with Plinio's son Tito. Bandy detects an element of parody in Hesse's construction of the novel. *The Glass Bead Game*, the heart of Castalia and the contemplative life, "is in reality a sham, a singularly jejune academic exercise of as much significance as, say, the reconstruction of the conjugations of hypothetical irregular Sanskrit verbs" (p. 304). The Game is

... the apotheosis of the 'scientific method,' which insists that education consists in putting square pegs into square holes, round into round; of the belief that all is calculable and knowable; in short, of the entire Socratic tradition, which teaches that cognition exists in itself, without reference to experience. Whether Hesse intended it so, the *Spiel* is, finally, a damning indictment of the palace of art which is Castalia. (p. 305)

For Bandy, Knecht's decision to leave the Order signals his desire to become more Dionysian, but in his new role as a man of action Knecht's deeds do not amount to much. The sum of Knecht's attempt to unite Castalia with the world is merely a plan, never realized, of becoming a private tutor to a spoilt child. Any suggestion of far-reaching consequences arising from his actions, including their impact on Tito as a future leader, is nothing more than speculation.

Bandy points out that Knecht is not an automaton but a man driven by human passions. Hesse may have wanted us to interpret Knecht's actions as a form of sacrifice, but they can also be read as a settling of old scores. There is a certain will to power in Knecht, manifested among other ways by his competitive verbal exchanges with Plinio in their student years. Knecht recognizes the instinctive, active, Dionysian life as the hallmark of the world Plinio moves in, and battles against this in defense of the Apollonian ideals of Castalia. Having failed to bring the dialectic to a close (as he wrongly believed he had to) in his debates with Plinio, Knecht sets out to master Plinio's son. In this Knecht partially succeeds, his death leaving Tito bound by "that most unmanly of emotions, guilt" (p. 306). Knecht, for all his admirable qualities, cannot avoid displaying the kind of arrogant, elitist indifference typical of the Castalian hierarchy. Plinio has experienced both Castalia and the world, but Knecht is at home only in the pedagogical province. Knecht eventually decides to leave the Order, but it is too late: he is by

that stage too much the Castalian, and he is ill-prepared for the world. His knowledge of life outside the pedagogical province is inadequate, just as his physical capabilities are not up to the task of swimming across the icy cold lake. This, from Bandy's perspective, is where the tragic element of the book is to be found. The book demonstrates that "[o]nce a path is chosen it cannot be retraced; certain decisions are irrevocable" (p. 309). Knecht may have reached a decision to leave Castalia, but Castalia cannot leave him, and his attempt to bridge the gap to another world is doomed.

### **The importance of incompleteness**

Bandy is right, in my view, to point to qualities often unnoticed in Knecht and thereby to demystify him. Avoiding a romantic portrait of either Joseph as a man, or Knecht's tenure in the position of Magister Ludi, is of the utmost importance. I also share with Bandy a strong sense that the character of Knecht lives, as it were, beyond the confines prescribed for him by the narrator – and perhaps even by Hesse. We come to care about Knecht in ways that could not have been anticipated by his official Castalian biographer – in part, precisely because he is, despite his exalted achievements in office, at the end of the day simply a fellow human being. His death is shocking and saddening because we feel we would have liked to have known more about him – more of his weaknesses as well as his hitherto unrecognized or undeveloped strengths, more of his yearnings and desires, more of his emotional as well as intellectual life.

But it seems to me that Bandy does not take seriously enough his own exhortation to see the Hegelian dialectic as endless (p. 304), and, in particular, to recognize the importance of *incompleteness* as a theme in the novel. Bandy suggests that any question of whether Tito does go on to demand greater things of himself because of Knecht's death "is the subject for another book and no concern of ours" (p. 306). Yet, it is arguably only of no concern if we take the end of the main part of the book to be the end of the book as a whole. Clearly, however, it is not. If the different parts of the book are read in the order presented, more than one hundred pages remain after the point at which Knecht's death is described. Bandy sees Knecht's drowning as the conclusion of the book (p. 299), ignoring the fact that the poems and autobiographies follow. Hesse took great care in the construction of the book, agonizing over the order, structure and content of the different parts for more than a decade (see Field, 1968; Mileck, 1970; Remys, 1983). It is undeniable that he regarded the poems and autobiographies not as superfluous filler but as essential to the unity and message of the book as a whole. The importance of the three Lives has also been noted by a number of Hesse's interpreters (e.g., Johnson, 1956; Boulby, 1966; Ziolkowski, 1967; White & White, 1986). Even if we disregard what we know of Hesse's process of composition and his stated intentions for the book, the novel as published includes more than the main narrative and invites a more rounded reading than Bandy wants to give it. By ignoring the poems and autobiographies, Bandy brings not only the book but Joseph Knecht to a premature close. Bandy stresses that Knecht *lives* (Bandy, 1972, p. 301), but he deals with only one part of the life of Knecht conveyed through the novel. If we take the autobiographies seriously as fictional portraits by Knecht himself of how he might have lived in earlier times and other contexts, a much more complex and nuanced picture of the key character of the novel emerges. The autobiographies are important not just for the overall coherence and meaning of the book but for the understanding we develop of Knecht's character, sense of identity and purpose, and destiny. For while we never find out what will happen to Tito following Knecht's

death, the *possibility* of a profound process of transformation and growth is presented and this is elaborated in some detail via other characters in the autobiographies.

Johnson argues that the autobiographies have an intimate relationship with the work as a whole and in particular to Knecht's seemingly inexplicable death at the end of the main part of the novel. For Johnson, education – conceived as the process through which knowledge is transmitted – is a key theme that links the three Lives with the fate of Knecht in the main part of the novel. The main part of the book concentrates on learning by example, as exemplified by the relationship between Knecht and the Music Master. Education is thus “an individual pedagogical process for Joseph Knecht; the older man seeks to reach into the spirit of his pupil and to awaken in him the powers which are latent” (Johnson, 1956, p. 166). A similar process is depicted in the three autobiographies, but with the emphasis more on the apprentice than the Master:

The rainmaker's instruction to Josef and Josef's instruction of his pupils, the association of Josephus Famulus with the older hermit, Dion Pugil, and the yearning of Dasa for tutelage from the older yogin all portray aspects of the educational process. In all of these instances the younger man seeks out the older, wiser man and proves in varying ways that he is suitable as pupil, and it is always the individual relationship that is most important in Knecht's educational ideals. (p. 166)

There is, Johnson maintains, no suggestion that the teacher should attempt to influence large numbers of people or that he or she should become a leader among his or her fellow human beings. It is sufficient, from Hesse's point of view, that the teacher transmit his or her gifts to a single individual.

This puts Knecht's achievements in the last part of his life in a different perspective. Bandy asserts that a man of action is judged by his deeds and implies that Knecht's deeds following his departure from Castalia are hardly noteworthy (Bandy, 1972, p. 305). But the very act of committing oneself in a pedagogical relationship to another is itself a deed of profound educational and ethical importance. This, to my reading, is one of the key points Hesse wanted to make: that one's contribution as a human being need not be tied to the achievement of great status, wealth or recognition. Knecht reaches the very summit of the Castalian hierarchy – the position of Magister Ludi – but gives away all of the trappings (and burdens) of high office to take on an educational responsibility of no less significance: guiding the learning and development of one young person. He does so with humility, courage and hope for the future. It is not difficult to agree with Bandy that Knecht is, in some ways, ill-prepared for this task. His grasp of the realities of the world outside Castalia is incomplete and inadequate. He has no prior experience of working as a tutor in Tito's world. He has not raised children himself and, having not grown up with his own parents, he has little understanding of the complexities of family life. But Knecht takes the decision all the same, and as such his actions can be seen as a sacrifice not only of the trappings of Castalian power but of all that was familiar to him. In so doing, he lives out one of the most important educational virtues: the ability to take risks – to make oneself uncomfortable, to go beyond one's prior experiences and existing understanding of the world. The act of diving into the lake can also be seen as a manifestation of this willingness to take risks, but it is only a logical extension of the attitude already displayed in making the decision to leave the Order.

Bandy is wary of speculating too much on what might lie ahead for Tito following

Knecht's death. But if it is merely *possible* to read Knecht's plunge into the icy waters of the lake as a form of sacrifice for Tito (and for the good that might flow from Tito's subsequent development as a leader and human being), this sacrificial role of the teacher is made quite explicit in the autobiographies. The Rainmaker, for example, ends up losing his life in the service of his community, teaching his young apprentice more through this act than any words could convey. Josephus Famulus too, in the second of the three Lives, must sacrifice himself to those who pour out their confessions to him, absorbing time and time again all of their troubles with the quiet gift of patient listening. And Dasa, in the third autobiography, must suffer greatly before learning the lesson from an old yogi in a forest that physical life is illusory. When the book is read as a whole, it becomes clear that Hesse saw teaching as a vitally important form of service – service to others, to the preservation and advancement of knowledge, and to the value of learning. The name Knecht is highly significant here, for it means “servant.” Even in the most prestigious role within the Castalian hierarchy – the position of Magister Ludi – it is clear that Knecht becomes a servant for others. He learns that far from gaining greater freedom to do as he wishes, in accepting the post of Magister Ludi he takes on a host of new burdensome responsibilities. He sacrifices his freedom to serve the greater good of the Castalian community. The same theme is evident in the autobiographies, where the link between Knecht living his life in Castalia and Knecht imagining an earlier life remains obvious: the name “Knecht” is retained for the central character in “The Rainmaker”; the first name “Josephus” is used in the second autobiography; and “Dasa” in the third autobiography also means “servant” (Johnson, 1956, p. 164). Hesse makes it clear, through both the main part of the book and the autobiographies, that there is no one way to teach, but all forms of teaching involve some form of sacrifice. Teaching, from this point of view, is a process of dying (symbolically or literally) but also of giving birth to new learning and new life.

I concur with Cohn's view that Knecht's developing consciousness of himself is a key motif in the novel (Cohn, 1950, p. 348). She, unlike Bandy (1972), pays attention to the autobiographies and sees them as an extension of the theme of death and rebirth introduced as the very end of the main part of the novel. But one point in her argument raises problems of a similar kind to those noted in relation to Bandy's analysis. Cohn claims that Knecht's nature has “not been basically changed or molded by his education” (Cohn, 1950, p. 348-349). Much may depend here on what Cohn means by “education” (she does not elaborate on this), but on almost any definition of the term the claim is troubling. For while it is true that Knecht seems destined for greatness in Castalia, and has from the beginning a strong sense of his power and influence over others, the self that he comes to understand as the events in the novel unfold is shaped in significant ways by his educational relationships with others. Joseph does have certain qualities that mark him out from others, and these are noticed early on by his teachers and mentors, but the form these attributes take is by no means predestined. His relationships with the Music Master, Plinio, Father Jacobus and others play a crucial part in making him the man that he becomes and they leave their imprint on his legacy as Magister Ludi. Through Plinio, Joseph acquires some understanding of the outside world (as indirect and underdeveloped as this may be) and a willingness to question and debate ideas; through Father Jacobus, he develops a greater awareness of the importance of history; and through the Music Master he learns the value of humility and dedication, among other virtues. The most significant step Knecht takes in his life – his decision to leave the Order – arguably could not have been taken without the influence of these people, and others, on his character and understanding.

Hesse's portrait of Knecht allows the reader to appreciate the significance of



incompleteness in human life. Knecht's death is, in one sense, a return to the center, as Cohn suggests. His death can be seen as a fulfillment of all that he has strived for, and seemed destined to strive for, throughout his life. Indeed, if the autobiographies are taken seriously as products of the young Joseph's emerging consciousness of himself, it might be said that Knecht had a premonition of his own death decades before his plunge into the lake. Death and the endless cycle of life are key themes in the three Lives. These are, it must be remembered, lives Joseph has been asked to imagine he may have lived. In the Lives, death is an important part of a wider educational process. That process involves the passing on of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next. There is in the three autobiographies also a focus on the deepening of understanding within central characters, the development of communicative and pedagogical relationships, and the idea of commitment to a community. Joseph, as the composer of these Lives, prefigures the pattern his own life will take. Yet, even if we might accept (with Cohn) that Knecht's death is a process of returning "home," this does not mean his life is *complete*. Both Bandy and Cohn, it seems to me, want to 'round out' Knecht's life too quickly and neatly. Bandy does not wish to speculate beyond what is presented to us in the main part of the story and, by ignoring the autobiographies, he finds a Knecht who is perhaps more unequivocally Castalian than the book as a whole suggests. Cohn, on the other hand, by downplaying the significance of education in the formation of Knecht's character, paints a picture of a life with a clearer and more unswerving sense of purpose and direction than is really the case. Knecht, like all of us, has more to do, more to teach, more to learn. This process, as the third of the autobiographies makes plain, is endless. We may have brief moments to pause and rest (and death, as Hesse sees it, may be one of these), but then we must awaken again, engage once more in the "wild, intoxicating, desperate dance of life" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 529), and go on.

### **Education: The bridge between death and life**

The analysis above supports Hesse's view that Knecht's death in *The Glass Bead Game* has important educational implications. I have argued that to understand how and why this is so, attention needs to be paid not only to the main part of the novel but also to the poems and autobiographies. I have suggested that one key to grasping the educational significance of Hesse's portrayal of Knecht's death lies in the notion of incompleteness. Knecht, I have maintained, remains at the time of his death an incomplete being. This, however, attests to rather than diminishes the value of education in human life. Education, Hesse's novel shows, allows us to acknowledge our incompleteness, to see ourselves as beings in formation, and to appreciate the need to pass on what we know to others. The moment of death is the culmination of this educational process. Death is, or can be (as it is in Knecht's case), the point at which our own incompleteness comes most sharply into focus, but it can also play a significant role in teaching others to appreciate their unfinishedness and their responsibilities to themselves and others.

The relationships among life, death and incompleteness are explored in a number of the poems that follow the main part of *The Glass Bead Game*. The poems, as Knecht's own constructions, provide a glimpse of his developing understanding of the nature of reality and the meaning of his own existence. The opening words of the first poem, "Lament" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 407), are these: "No permanence is ours; we are a wave / That flows to fit whatever form it finds." The poem goes on to say that we crave "form that binds," yet we fill "[m]old after mold"

and “never rest”. The poem closes with this verse:

To stiffen into stone, to persevere!  
 We long forever for the right to stay.  
 But all that ever stays with us is fear,  
 And we shall never rest upon our way.

The poem suggests that our human lives are characterized by a restlessness that is never satisfied. We seek permanence, a place where we can stand still, yet this can never be found. Our lives, in this sense, remain incomplete. Even in an apparently successful and full life, there is never a point at which the restless tension to which this poem refers can be, as it were, ‘switched off’. We cannot ever say, during the course of our lives, that we are ‘complete’ as human beings. If this seems to imply that our lives will be ‘lacking’ in something, this need not be regarded in a negative light. To the contrary, it is through the very process of searching – of asking questions, exploring, seeking answers to life’s riddles – that the meaning of our existence can be found. This is not an easy process; it involves constant *struggle*. One of Knecht’s other poems, “On Reading an Old Philosopher,” is illuminating on this point. The poem speaks of recognizing that “everything must wither, die, and fall,” while at the same time adding:

Yet still above this vale of endless dying  
 Man’s spirit, struggling incorruptibly,  
 Painfully raises beacons, death defying,  
 And wins, by longing, immortality.

The process of struggle, then, can be life affirming. In a poem reflecting on the work of Aquinas, reference is made to those who “seemed condemned to doubt and irony” and “longings for a better life” (p. 419) enduring suffering and strife. In the end, however, “those who trust ourselves the least / Who doubt and question most, these, it may be, / Will make their mark upon eternity” (p. 420). A time may come, the poem notes, when a person who confesses self-doubts will be “ranked among the blessed” (p. 420).

*The Glass Bead Game*, along with several of Hesse’s other novels (e.g., Hesse, 1969, 2000b), makes a significant contribution to the German tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.<sup>7</sup> Novels in this tradition have a focus on the education of the central character, but ‘education’ here should be interpreted broadly to mean formation, growth or development. One of the key aspects of this growth, in Hesse’s novels at least, is the development of an awareness of – and *acceptance* of – our incompleteness. Paulo Freire, among others, has recognized that it is our unfinishedness that gives our lives their ethical character and makes education both possible and necessary. Unfinishedness, Freire argues, is “essential to our human condition. Whenever there is life, there is unfinishedness, though only among women and men is it possible to speak of an awareness of unfinishedness” (Freire, 1998, p. 52). Awareness that we remain incomplete beings does not, for Freire, signal a need for despair but for celebration. “I like being human,” Freire says, “because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet conscious of such conditioning, I know that I can go beyond it, which is the essential difference between conditioned and determined existence” (p. 54). Freire continues:

It is in our incompleteness, of which we are aware, that education as a permanent process

is grounded. Women and men are capable of being educated only to the extent that they are capable of recognizing themselves as unfinished. Education does not make us educable. It is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable. And the same awareness in which we are inserted makes us eternal seekers. Eternal because of hope. Hope is not just a question of grit or courage. It's an ontological dimension of our human condition. (p. 58)

Knecht's growth as a human being is consistent with the Freirean view of incompleteness. Knecht has been a seeker his whole life. He has, in Freirean terms, been conditioned by Castalia but not determined by it. He has questioned and probed, placing himself and his society under an increasingly critical microscope. The feeling of hope he experiences after leaving the Order ("Everything was new again, mysterious, promising": Hesse, 2000a, p. 385) is, to a considerable extent, engendered by his recognition of his own incompleteness. Knecht is full of anticipation in contemplating the educational task ahead. He thinks carefully about how he will work with Tito, about the best pedagogical approach to adopt, given Tito's background and inclinations. Knecht's sudden drowning may seem to bring this process of teaching and learning to an abrupt halt, but the novel suggests otherwise. As Knecht himself notes in one of his poems (Hesse, 2000a, p. 421),

Even the hour of our death may send  
Us speeding on to fresh and newer spaces,  
And life may summon us to newer races.  
So be it, heart: bid farewell without end.

With these thoughts in mind, I want now to suggest that education can provide a crucial bridge between death and life. Through teaching we can, as it were, continue to 'live on' through the lives of others.<sup>8</sup> In this section I elaborate on this idea via the work of David Blacker (1998), who provides an insightful analysis of education as a form of immortality. Blacker traces this notion back to the early Greeks, where two halves of a Socratic vision of education as immortality can be found. On the one hand, there is the Platonic idea of 'doing' philosophy as a preparation for death. On this view, if one has lived as a lover of learning, leading a contemplative life, one has nothing to fear in death. The more one can immerse oneself in the eternal world of Forms, and ultimately identify with them, the less one has to lose when one dies. Teaching is of secondary concern in this approach: "The other-as-pupil is to be engaged only to the extent such pedagogical communion aids in deliverance to the world of Forms" (p. 11). The other half of the Socratic vision, however, places teaching very much to the fore: "one lives on by influencing other beings as a teacher, and then in the influence they, in turn, have on still others, and so on *ad infinitum*" (p. 11). This view, exemplified by the Sophists – or at least *some* of the Sophists – has a focus on practical affairs and the preparation of young people for civic life. Blacker summarizes the differences between the two views in this way:

Classical Greece, then, presents us with two *de facto* separable foci around which the ultimate purposes of education and, by extension, motivating reasons for teaching, may be articulated. The one looks 'upward' to the star-lit divine: the Platonic shedding of this-worldly distractions pursuant to an epiphanous yet enduring identification with the *logos*, the articulation of truth – a yearning for a kind of immortality whose passageway

is a glimpse at the structure and content of the cosmos. But the other ideal looks ‘downward’ toward earth, to an educated *person* who can flourish him or herself as well as garner prosperity – material, political, cultural, ethical – within and for the world of other human beings. This earthward-gazing sophistic ideal lives on through people and their associations, not sublimated in a disembodied reason. (p. 13)

These two views find expression in the contemporary world in different ways. Blacker suggests that underlying scientific research in the West is a commitment to investigation that transcends the particulars of the individual and his or her historical circumstances. There is a form of Platonic skyward gazing that can find, for example, such beauty in a mathematical proof that the investigator will be moved to tears. Teaching remains worthwhile in this shared scientific enterprise because it “continues and extends a noetic search for the *logos*. [. . .] Every research paper’s footnote becomes swept up in the quest” (p. 16). This Platonic commitment to advancing the frontiers of knowledge is, however, a world away from the everyday realities of contemporary school teaching, where the sophistic form of immortality prevails. The idea of reaching others, of having an influence on them, no matter how many or how few, carries tremendous weight here. This is an earthward call to connect with the other-as-human-being, to ‘make a difference’ in someone else’s life. On this view, it is the human being who is very much at the centre of educational endeavors, not (for example) economic growth or the furthering of a political or religious agenda. The ways in which teachers influence others are not always easy to measure (indeed, there are good reasons for not *wanting* to try and measure them), and most of us are influenced in a myriad of different ways by multiple people. No one, it might be said, is ‘self-taught’; we are all subject to influences, past and present, direct and indirect, that may not be detected or known but are there nonetheless.

Blacker argues for an equilibrium between the two halves of the Socratic vision. There is a need to overcome the potential problem of egoism: the idea of a self-centered teacher hunting for ‘victims’ in whom his or her influence might survive, or worse, of seeking to produce ‘copies’ of him- or herself. It is also important that the influence be an *educative* one. To avoid the dangers of both egoism and manipulation, Blacker maintains, the sophistic commitment to influencing others must also involve caring for the *logos*. A teacher cannot *just* want to influence others, but must also have a commitment to seeking the truth, even where this runs counter to immediate self-interest. By retaining this more Platonic element of the educative process, the teacher remains “dedicated above all to ushering the student into some arena of human understanding” (p. 22). At the same time, a different but equally dangerous form of egoism – Blacker calls it the “egoism of obliviousness” (p. 24) – must also be avoided. This is the idea that one can and ought to undertake scientific research without regard for its potential human consequences. We have responsibilities not only to our subject but to our fellow human beings. Avoiding both forms of egoism and finding equilibrium is, Blacker admits, not easy, but clues can be found in Plato’s early Socratic dialogues. In the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno*, for example, Socrates allows us to learn at least the following: first, “though the search for truth is a noble one, requiring all sorts of attendant virtues, [. . .] only a fool would ever claim to have it in final form;” second, “one can only take sincere aim at that ever-elusive truth via other similarly inquiring human beings, through dialogue” (p. 25). This must, Blacker adds, be a relationship between people seeking to learn. In true dialogue, Blacker posits, “teacher and learner are irrecoverably human, but somehow also more than human, driven along as they are by an intertwining of skyward and earthward gazes” (p.26). The teacher-as-immortal must learn to

“vanish into wisdom for the sake of wisdom’s pupil, as the pupil searches for his past and for his future” (p. 26). The teacher, in this sense, must die in order to live and this in turn helps teach the learner about the death that is common to us all. The teacher-as-immortal, Blacker concludes, “is neither ‘over here’ nor ‘up there,’ but is cross-stitched into a mindful fabric that binds us, warms us from the cold and, eventually serves for all of us teacher-learners as our burial shroud” (p. 26).

Blacker’s analysis is helpful in understanding the distinctive educational features of Knecht’s life. Castalia as a whole and the Glass Bead Game in particular are much more closely aligned with the Platonic – ‘skyward’ – half of the Socratic vision of immortality. It is the Game itself to which those in the Order are most devoted. The Game, when played at the highest levels, transcends the particulars of everyday life: it participates in an other-worldly realm akin to Plato’s world of the Forms. Members of the Order of the Glass Bead Game have no desire to dirty their hands with political and practical affairs, and have little or no understanding of life outside the pedagogical province. Many look down upon the concerns of ordinary people in the outside world as unworthy of them. Free from the burden of having to earn a living or raise a family or deal with institutions and bureaucracies, they can immerse themselves in their studies and devote themselves almost wholly to the beauty of the Game. To be sure, some must hold positions of administrative leadership, but they are the exception and those who win such high office are expected to discharge their responsibilities with a sense of honor and duty to the Order and the sanctity of Castalia.

Knecht grows up in this world and he comes to venerate the Game as others have for generations before him. But his educational path is also distinctive. As he progresses through the Castalian system he comes to more deeply appreciate the transcendent beauty and inner logic of the beloved Game while at the same time growing increasingly less certain about the society in which it is embedded. His studies take him further into the labyrinthine mysteries of the Game – its history and underlying meaning – than any of his colleagues have ventured. He puts his ideas about the Game to the test, not just in his debates with Plinio but in his private studies after graduating from his elite school. He goes far beyond not only his fellow students but most of the Masters in his thinking and probing, to such an extent that even his revered mentor, the Music Master, finds it necessary to issue a caution about his obsessive quest. Knecht loves the Game for its own sake and not merely for the prestige or elements of performance and ritual associated with it. But all forms of intellectual endeavor, Knecht comes to realize, occur in a social context. The Game, along with other intellectual pursuits in Castalia, cannot be seen as separate from human lives – or from the need to pass on knowledge from one life to another. Knecht becomes aware that there is more to life than the Game and that he still has much to learn.

As *The Glass Bead Game* unfolds, the educational importance of certain human qualities or dispositions becomes clearer and clearer. These qualities include openness, humility, an inquiring and questioning frame of mind, a dialogical and collegial spirit, commitment to those we teach and with whom we work, and a willingness to change while also appreciating and upholding what is worthwhile in our traditions and cultures. These qualities develop and deepen through Knecht’s life, and in the lives of the characters he creates in his fictional autobiographies, but they become most apparent in the period immediately prior to and just after his departure from the Order. It is in this period leading up to his death that Knecht becomes most aware of his own incompleteness and of the dangers – exemplified by the Castalian hierarchy – of *not* acknowledging incompleteness. Castalia, Knecht comes to realize, is in decay

not because the Game is somehow lacking in aesthetic richness but because those who devote their lives to it – and to other domains of knowledge within the pedagogical province – cannot see the need to *reinvent themselves*.

For all of their intellectual refinement, those in positions of power in Castalia, along with the most advanced exponents of the Game, cannot see that their grasp of education, knowledge and human flourishing is both limited and limiting. The emphasis in Castalia is very much on the development of the cognitive and aesthetic elements of human life. Even in this domain, however, their reach is limited: Castalians study art and culture rather than *creating* it. Emotions as sources of knowledge are largely ignored. Indeed, many Castalians appear to be, as it were, emotionally stunted.<sup>9</sup> Their language in communicating with each other, particularly in the upper reaches of the Castalian hierarchy, has a formality that appears to deny their existence as passionate beings. There is a certain coldness among Castalian leaders such as Alexander, with whom Knecht converses after requesting to leave the Order. Apart from the reverence felt by younger members of the hierarchy toward some of the older Masters, it is not clear how love is expressed and experienced. This does not mean, of course, that love is altogether absent from the pedagogical province. Indeed, it becomes evident that even Alexander, despite acting with almost clinical reserve in his final difficult conversations with Knecht, has deep feelings for the Magister Ludi. Weary after the events of the past few days, Alexander reflects on “that incomprehensible man whom he had loved above all others and who had inflicted this great grief upon him” (Hesse, 2000a, p. 383). But in the end Alexander is more firmly committed to the protocol of the Order than to his personal relationship with Knecht. As he puts it, when speaking with Knecht: “I do not speak for myself, but as President of the Order, and he is responsible to the Board for every word” (p. 381).<sup>10</sup>

Castalia is, in many respects, closed in its whole orientation toward the world. There is an assumption, conveyed by the narrator in his introduction to the Game at the beginning of the book, that Castalia represents a high water mark in human intellectual achievement, rising as it did from the ashes of 20<sup>th</sup> century superficiality and debasement. This assumption is, however, largely untested because the pedagogical province remains so cleanly separated from the rest of the world. Dialogue, for the most part, stays within the physical confines of Castalia. Knecht’s association with Father Jacobus represents an exception. Plinio may bring an outside perspective, but he has to do so on Castalian soil, following Castalian rules, and in an intellectual community where he constitutes very much the minority. The form of education that sustains the Castalian sense of superiority lacks the humility, the openness and the breadth of understanding necessary to not only tolerate but positively embrace difference. When challenged, the Castalian elite turn inwards, not outwards, clinging to their belief in the beauty of the Glass Bead Game and the rightness of their social hierarchy.

Hesse’s intentions in depicting Castalia in this light warrant reflection. Thomas Mann, in his Introduction to Hesse’s *Demian*, points out that “even as a poet he [Hesse] likes the role of editor and archivist, the game of masquerade behind the guise of one who ‘brings to light’ other people’s papers” (Mann, 1999, p.vii). In reading *The Glass Bead Game*, Mann felt very strongly “how much the element of parody, the fiction and persiflage of a biography based upon learned conjectures, in short the verbal playfulness, help keep within limits this late work, with dangerously advanced intellectuality, and contribute to its dramatic effectiveness” (p.viii). A tension is established in the novel between the insular earnestness of the Castalian hierarchy and a central character who respects this, lives and succeeds within it, but also questions it. The narrator occupies a very interesting position here. On the one hand, he is a representative of the

excessively serious, somewhat smug Castalian attitude and it is largely through him that readers must construct a picture of the pedagogical province and its inhabitants. Yet, subtle changes can be detected in the narrator as the novel progresses, with the more distancing, official and celebratory tone of the early part of the book becoming slightly less sure and more complex as the story of Knecht unfolds. The narrator, then, grows as he tells Knecht's story, and toward the end of the main part of the book, shades of hitherto disguised emotion can be detected. Hesse's narrative structure, with its gentle, ambivalent parody, sharpens the sense that all is not well in Castalia while also allowing the reader to develop a measure of sympathy for not only Knecht but also the narrator and the ideals he represents. Hesse himself respected the contemplative life but could also see, with particular acuity in the years leading up to the second World War, the need for something more than mere retreat to a palace of the intellect when faced with pressing social and political problems.

Knecht's distinctive perspective on the Game and on Castalian society has been shaped, in considerable part – but in ways that could not be measured or quantified – by his dialogues with Plinio and Father Jacobus, his friendship with Fritz, and the guidance he has received (by example) from the Music Master. Along with these positive influences, however, his views have also been shaped by the opposition he encounters from the Castalian hierarchy. The rigidity, coldness and incomprehension exhibited by Alexander and the Board of Educators in response to his Circular Letter requesting his leave from the Order play an important role in convincing him of some of the shortcomings of the Castalian system. These influences, while in one sense 'negative', are nonetheless educational in Knecht's case: given the man he is, and the way his views and character have been shaped by other (more 'positive') influences, Joseph is able to respond to this opposition from the hierarchy calmly, with dignity and equanimity but also with a certain quiet firmness and strength of resolve. Knecht *learns* from the Board and their reaction to his proposal as much as he learns from the positive influences of Plinio, Father Jacobus and the Music Master.

Recognizing, implicitly, the significance of these influences on his own character and thought, Knecht comes to see the supreme importance of education for others. In his Circular Letter to the Board of Educators he makes his position clear:

A Board of Educators can function without a Magister Ludi. But although we have almost forgotten it, 'Magister Ludi' of course originally meant not the office we have in mind when we use the word, but simply schoolmaster. And the more endangered Castalia is, the more its treasures stale and crumble away, the more our country will need its schoolmasters, its brave and good schoolmasters. Teachers are more essential than anything else, men who can give the young the ability to judge and distinguish, who serve them as examples of the honoring of truth, obedience to the things of the spirit, respect for language. That holds not only for our elite schools, which will be closed down sooner or later, but also and primarily for the secular schools on the outside where the burghers and peasants, artisans and soldiers, politicians, military officers, and rulers are educated and shaped while they are still malleable children. That is where the basis for the cultural life of the country is to be found, not in the seminars or in the Glass Bead Game. [. . .] More and more we must recognize the humble, highly responsible service to the secular schools as the chief and most honorable part of our mission. That is what we must seek to extend (Hesse, 2000a, p. 342).

Knecht, then, unlike most of his Castalian colleagues, might be said to embrace both halves of the Socratic vision discussed by Blacker. He realizes that as he plays the Game he is participating in something ‘bigger than himself’ – something that is there to be known and loved, to which he and others can dedicate an important part of their lives, and which will endure beyond the triumphs and difficulties of any given epoch. At the same time, he recognizes the need to pass on what is known by Castalians to others – and to learn from those others. Knecht risks all in his commitment to this form of educational immortality, giving up the security and prestige of his position in Castalia, facing the derision of his colleagues, and entering a world largely unknown to him in the interests of making a difference in one human life.

While Knecht dies suddenly and tragically, he is, it might be argued, still well prepared for his own death.<sup>11</sup> In completing his poems and fictional autobiographies, he has given careful thought to the meaning of death and its relationship, through education, to life. He is, by the time he leaves the Order, accepting of his own limits and uncertainties. In some senses he fulfils, as Bandy argues, only a fraction of what he might have achieved in his post-Castalian life. He was, as he recognized himself, very much an incomplete human being and was ready to learn a great deal more. But while his contact with Tito is relatively brief, the mark he leaves on his young charge – and, indeed, on many of his former colleagues in Castalia – is a deep and permanent one, and it is clear that he will, in Blacker’s terms, ‘live on’ beyond his death.

### **Concluding comments**

There is much more that might be said about *The Glass Bead Game* from an educational point of view. While this paper has concentrated on the educational implications of Hesse’s portrayal of Knecht’s death, the book also allows us to address many other philosophical and pedagogical themes of enduring importance. These include the meaning and purpose of education, the question of what constitutes a well lived life, the nature of knowledge and the process of knowing, the need for a harmony between reason and emotion, the potential educative value of striving and suffering, the teacher-student relation, the role of dialogue in teaching and learning, the tension between certainty and uncertainty, the strengths and limitations of different forms of hierarchy and authority, and the relationship between the individual and society, among others. It should be noted also that Hesse explored educational themes in a number of his other novels (e.g., Hesse, 1968, 1999, 2000b) and non-fiction writings (Hesse, 1978). *The Glass Bead Game* is a rich, multilayered book, worthy of repeated readings. Hesse may have agonized for years over the book but the effort, from an educational perspective, was well worth it. Each generation must face new challenges, and the process of (re)reading both the ‘word’ and the ‘world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987) is never complete. In acknowledging this incompleteness, in questioning ourselves and the social structures of our time, and in continuing to reflect on the ideas conveyed through novels such as *The Glass Bead Game*, we follow a path consistent with the one already established by Joseph Knecht.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fritz Tegularius was said to have been based on Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Hesse read and admired. See Koester (1967, p. 135).

<sup>2</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of decadence from an educational point of view, see Wilson (2001).

<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, not the only perspective from which to consider the book's educational significance. Elsewhere (Roberts, 2007/in press, 2008/in press), detailed attention has been paid to the importance of uncertainty, dialogue and critical thought in Joseph Knecht's educational transformation.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of death as a theme for educationists has been explored by a number of theorists over the years. See, for example, Blacker (1998) and Puolimatka & Solasaari (2006). See also the symposium on Blacker's book *Dying to Teach: The Educator's Search for Immortality* (1997) in Laird (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Given the strong focus on pedagogical matters in *The Glass Bead Game*, it is rather surprising that so little attention has been paid to the book by educationists. Among the exceptions, see Peters (1996, ch. 9) and Sears (1992). Both Peters and Sears apply ideas from the book in insightful ways, but their focus is principally on the Glass Bead Game as a metaphor rather than on the educational life – and death – of Joseph Knecht (see Roberts, 2008/in press).

<sup>6</sup> The question of whether Bertram does in fact die does not receive a definitive answer in the book. When Thomas von der Trave (Knecht's predecessor in the position of Magister Ludi) falls ill, Bertram, his deputy, assumes his responsibilities. He meets his obligations but with difficulty. A number of Bertram's colleagues in the hierarchy seek to undermine him and after annual Glass Bead festival, he seeks leave in the mountains. The narrator notes that "Bertram did not return from his outing in the mountains, and after a while the story went round that he had fallen to his death from a cliff" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 202). Friedrichsmeyer's (1974) in-depth analysis of the Bertram incident certainly seems to suggest the death actually occurs. Whether this is a literal death or not, it is clear that Bertram is at least symbolically dead to Castalia.

<sup>7</sup> Hesse was, however, aware of some of the limitations of the form and participated in the *Bildungsroman* tradition in a critical and innovative manner. See further, Swales (1978) and Peters (1996).

<sup>8</sup> As one of the anonymous reviewers put it, learning conceived in this way becomes not merely 'life-long' (as contemporary jargon would have it) but *many* lives long.

<sup>9</sup> This lack of adequate attention to the development of the emotions has important implications for the conception and practice of education. There is not space here to address this point, but for excellent work relevant to this theme see Nias (1996), Boler (1999) and Zembylas (2002, 2003, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> There are wider implications here for the way we understand the relationship between knowledge, experience and education. One of the anonymous reviewers makes this point very elegantly: "The problem is not only that knowledge fails to unify either experience or itself; it also that we come to knowledge by way of our self-other relations and our emotional worlds of learning (and teaching, however mute). Sometimes we do things with and to knowledge as ways of doing things with and to our significant others and that other that is our own self."

<sup>11</sup> On the potential importance of education in preparing us for death, see Puolimatka & Solasaari (2006).